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WWRC rehabilitates mind, body

Therapy Changes lives

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FISHERSVILLE —The first patients came to the Woodrow Wilson facility here to recover from war wounds. Most came to the Shenandoah Valley by train, then were transported down the long drive to Woodrow Wilson General Hospital.

The network of narrow buildings was constructed by the Army for war wounded in 1942, but they were intended for temporary use. World War II wouldn't last forever, after all.

Sixty-three years later, thousands of people still make the drive down the long road off U.S. 250, but only some have physical ailments. More often they have cognitive difficulties. They need training in a job that will sustain them — give them a living wage.

Now, most of them are students rather than patients.

Bob Brackett is one of them.

"Woodrow Wilson saved my life," he said.

About 3,000 people make up the community that is WWRC, tucked in behind the Augusta County school complex. The facility was sold in 1947 to the state and the county. While the county used their half of the 500-acre facility for schools, several visionaries from the state rehabilitation services unit created WWRC. Two dormitories house residential students, while others come to WWRC for a variety of services, all designed to restore people with disabilities. Scientific and technological advances take place at the center, said Dick Luck, administrator.

But by far the bulk of the center's work is in teaching vocational training. More than a dozen disciplines are available, determined in a thorough evaluation when the student is accepted at the center. The community of WWRC is relatively unknown to the greater Augusta County area, said Brackett. That's a shame, he said.

Injured in a car crash about four years ago, Brackett recovered from his obvious wounds and went back to work at the American Red Cross. He struggled to keep up with his work, coordinating efforts to respond to disasters. He coped using dozens of Post-It notes stuck around his desk. It turns out he has the classic symptoms of a closed head injury: short term memory loss and difficulty concentrating.

He was referred to WWRC and moved to the campus from his home near Orange.

"It's life-changing," he said. "It gave me hope again."

Computer aided drafting is custom made for someone like Brackett. Having visual options on a computer screen keeps him on task and organized.

And his instructors not only teach the coursework, but provide motivation by living beyond their own disabilities.

Both A.D. Strickland and Ed West came to the center as students.

Strickland lost his left hand in a meat grinder when he was 18.

Three weeks after the accident, he went back to work at the meat processing plant, but a Department of Rehabilitation Services counselor talked him into coming to the center to be fitted with an artificial hand.

He doesn't use the hand — he gets along fine without it, "They used to call me an OT drop-out," he said with a laugh. After working at a local industry for several years, Strickland learned of a job back at the center.

He's worked there since 1966. Working at paper drafting bored Strickland in the early 1980s.

"I almost started looking for something else," he said.

Then in 1985, computer programming changed the face of the craft, and Strickland, a self-admitted technology nut, helped install programs.

Not only did it revolutionize drafting, it offered opportunities to teach people with extensive disabilities.

"We had someone who didn't have any hands, and we were able to use voice-commands," he said.

His teaching partner Ed West lost both legs in Vietnam in 1970. He couldn't find his place in a traditional job after coming home, so he

spent 10 years traveling on a three-wheeled Harley Davidson, then found himself at the center for training.

Like Strickland, he found a fulfilling career teaching others to create plans for buildings, plans for restored lives.

"The best part is in working with people who need special help in their lives," he said. "They're facing these challenges, some are away from home for the first time.

The people we work with are amazing. Not a day goes by that I don't learn something myself."

Bob Bonilla injured his back in a hunting accident, but a dry sense of humor and willingness to learn have helped his recovery.

"I'm the biggest nut that ever fell out of a tree," he said about his tree stand fall.

He studies at WWRC, commuting from his Nelson County home.

Scott Hildebrand built houses in Tidewater until his spine was severed in a car crash. He is in a wheelchair and has only limited use of his hands.

He uses the computers at WWRC haltingly, learning a new skill that will make him employable again.

"They teach you how to do a lot of things. Be an independent person," he said. "

I have always been independent. I don't like asking nobody for nothing. That's the only thing about being in this chair that drives me crazy — having to ask people for help.

"I want to get a job and get out on my own. I'll just go back to where I was. I don't have to live off that little state check," he said.

When the founders of the center proposed it to the General Assembly in the mid-1940s, they promised that the students' success would pay for their training. Tax revenue from workers returning to jobs would make the center pay for itself, they



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Using a mouse on one side and a book open on the other side, Bill Bonilla works at a computer station during a Computer Aided Drafting class at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center on Friday. Although self-paced, the CAD training program is about 15 months long.



Mike Tripp/The News Leader

The sign in front of the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center administration building.

said.

But the reward isn't just financial, said Brackett who will graduate from his program this year.

"I'm happy again," Brackett said. "I'm excited. I look forward to life again. Thank God for Woodrow Wilson."

The restoration isn't limited to physical, Brackett said. And it's not just the network of therapists and physicians who do the work.

Charise Davidson studies materials management. Her high school counselors in Hampton referred her to WWRC for occupational training. She serves as DJ for a praise dance group that started out of a program at the campus chapel.

"It keeps you motivated."